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ABSTRACT

A successful conflict manager in the field of education (1) is aware of the problems facing the young, the oppressed, and the sensitive; (2) is harshly realistic about his own personal and role limitations; (3) attempts wherever possible to substitute collective judgments for personal discretion; (4) possesses the leadership and organizational ability necessary to deal with crisis-type conflicts that have gone beyond rational negotiation; and (5) does not become overly discouraged by frequent defeats. (Author/LLR)

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PREPARING EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

An address delivered before Division A of the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York Hilton Hotel, New York City, February 5, 1971.

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The ubiquity of conflict is one of the oldest motifs of human history. Since Homer, conflict has surely been the very stuff of literature. Since Genesis, conflict has been part and parcel of all epic religions. For the secularly oriented, conflict is unquestionably a pervasive theme of modern psychoanalysis and of existential psychology.

Since conflict is, and has been for many, an uncomfortable if not terrifying reality, mankind has spent an uncommon amount of time and effort trying to contain and to resolve its various manifestations. The history of law, of ethical religion, of dynastic succession, of government, of politics, can in one sense be reduced to a single common denominator: they are all considered attacks upon the prevalence of, and man's seeming propensity towards, conflict.

In view of this long and pungent history, one would assume that the

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arts of conflict resoltuion, or at least of conflict management, would be known to men and women the world around.

Alas, this is not so. Or, at least, if most men and women understand how to contain, manage, and resolve conflict, they are patently inept in translating what they know into logically derivative action. This generalization is, I think, true even of most professional students of social combat: to wit, political scientists. Perhaps it was this ineluctable reality that caused the late T. R. Powell to remark that political scientists should be humble for they have much to be humble about.

I start with this melancholy manifestation of professional and personal insecurity for, in terms of tight theory and validated pedagogy, I have not the foggiest notion how to prepare educational administrators for conflict resolution. My only real clue comes from a recipe I read recently in a women's magazine while I was waiting for my dentist. The recipe was for "Roast Duck with Orange Sauce". The recipe began, "Take a robust and carefully seasoned duck weighing at least 5 pounds ..." I suggest that in preparing educational administrators for conflict resolution, we start with a robust and carefully seasoned educational administrator weighing at least 195 pounds, preferably Black and a former NFL middle-line backer.

Now, of course, with these profundities I could sit down and you could go about more urgent business. But in order to fulfill program expectations, and at the risk of massive redundancy, let me dawdle a bit. For it is just possible that we may know more than we think we

know. To paraphrase John Gardner, the pieces may be lying around if only we can develop the knack of putting them together.

First of all, what is it that we are talking about? One of our conceptual problems, I think, is that we have often struggled for a definition of conflict when we should have been searching instead for a typology of conflicts. If anyone is to be prepared for conflict resolution, he had jolly well better be told early on that the term "conflict" is as rich a species as, say, the term "mammal". The elephant, the dolphin, and the bat are all mammals, but the differences are not without significance. War, strikes, and bureaucratic status-struggles are all forms of conflict, but their respective care and treatment are hardly identical. Even within educational organizations, perceptive educational administrators could, if they pondered the matter, construct a rich typology of conflicts. Actually, the term "educational organizations" is itself maddeningly all-encompassing, containing as it conceivably might, everything from John Brademas' Subcommittee or the United States Office of Education, to State Education Departments, local K-12 schools, colleges and universities, day-care centers, and Channel 13.

Take some possible "for-instances" within the educational organizations with which we are most familiar; schools and colleges. One typology might discriminate among subordinate conflicts, superordinate conflicts, and lateral conflicts. Put in another way, there are conflicts among those who are legally and/or administratively under the administrator; conflicts among those legally or administratively over the administrator; and conflicts among those legally or administratively removed from the admini-

strator, but impinging upon his domain. Any administrator who assumes that he can use the same techniques or style in resolving conflicts that emanate respectively from below, above, and sideways is either a genius or a fool. For example, let us assume that a superintendent observes a raging conflict inside his board of education. Quiet catalysis in the form of friendly visits to the homes of contending leaders may be the most useful approach. If the conflict is between two subordinate principals arguing about bus routes, a structured confrontation may be desirable. If the struggle is between the local John Birch Society and the local chapter of AAUW over sex education, public rhetoric and careful and elaborate coalition-building may be the superintendent's most effective tactic. My only point is that such strategems are not usually interchangeable. Conflict-resolution styles and techniques useful in one context may be quite disastrous in another.

Another typology might center on "constructive" versus "destructive" conflicts -- viewed of course from the vantage point of the values of a particular educational administrator. Until fairly recently, Western man has suffered a kind of Hobbesian anxiety: a concatenation of beliefs that all conflicts are bad. George Simmel[1], Louis Croser[2], Joseph Litterer[3], Bertram Gross[4], and others have reminded us that conflict can perform an indispensable function in keeping organizations dynamic. When I was Dean of the Maxwell School at Syracuse, I consciously tried to keep unresolved the healthy conflict between those holding disciplinary loyalties and those holding interdisciplinary loyalties. Some conflicts are resolved only at the price of mildew.

But other conflicts, unless quickly resolved in some fundamental sense, can destroy an organization. As Bertram Gross has written in his classic and gargantuan study, The Managing of Organizations, "For those who want to destroy an organization or its effectiveness, there is probably no more efficient method than the promotion of internal conflict."[5] Divide and conquer is one of the oldest of Machiavellian tactics. In the late 1960's, California, Columbia, and Cornell (among other universities) provided a variety of examples of faculty, administrators, and students attempting to promote internal conflict in one another's ranks in order to render a given establishment or anti-establishment helpless.

A third typology might distinguish "horizontal" and "vertical" conflicts. Horizontal conflicts tend to be about matters of substantive jurisdiction; vertical conflicts tend to be about matters of procedural jurisdiction. For example, a horizontal conflict is exemplified by a Humanities division and a Social Science division both claiming jurisdiction over the History department; or a Welfare Agency and a Board of Education both claiming responsibility for determining the components of day-care center programs. A vertical conflict is exemplified by a struggle by a local superintendent and a state commissioner over who should set standards for student dress; or between a college vice-president and a dean as to who should have the right of line-item transfer in a divisional budget.

A fourth typology -- almost seismographic in nature -- might be addressed to the question of the severity or quality of conflict. Every organization has an endless simmer of petty personality conflicts reflecting

the chemistry and foibles of interacting humans. The wise administrator uses a dozen devices to keep such conflicts under control. He separates antagonists in terms of physical space; he redefines roles; he expresses confidence in both in each other's presence; he appeals to the maturity, good sense, and common organizational goals of everyone concerned. Ultimately, he settles for a low hum of contentiousness as a necessary (and at times healthy) noise of the human condition; and he tries to internalize the wise words of Harlan Cleveland, "Do not get caught in the web of tensions you observe".

A second level of severity involves conflicts over program and budget. These may at times be rationalizations for personality or status conflicts, but they are often quite genuine manifestations of differences of opinion about institutional priorities and goals. These are the daily-diet conflicts that most educational administrators spend the overwhelming part of their time adjudicating and managing: should language be required of Ph.D. candidates; should sex be taught in life-adjustment courses; should the new math supersede the old math; should Regents exams be required; should the teachers get a 15% raise; should more money go to research or to development? Managing these kinds of conflict-laden issues is what the educational administrator gets paid for, and why he has a rug and a water cooler in his office. It is at this level of seismic severity that most of the behavioral science wisdom has its most specific relevance. It is here that the writings of Blake, Shepherd and Mouton[6]; Bennis[7]; Beckhard[8]; Gross[9]; McGregor[10]; Argyris[11]; Simon and March[12]; and other familiar and distinguished writers in the field of organizational behavior

and organizational development, have constructed penetrating diagnoses and prognoses. If I find the writings of some of these thoughtful people at times unsatisfying, it is in part because some of the wisest practitioners among them are incapable of translating into words the therapeutic virtuosity of their own clinical techniques; in part because, at least until recently, some of them have posited a love/open-communications/face-to-face therapeutic model that, as Mr. Agnew might say, distorts the delightful deviousness of devilish man beyond recognition. Surely there are way-stations between unfeeling authoritarianism and everybody-should-be-in-the-act sentimentality. We need better structural and behavioral models to guide us than presently obtain. To all of this we shall return.

A third level of seismic violence relates to the legitimacy of regime rather than to program priorities. This is the level of revolutionary conflict that has been so troublesome in recent years. At the heart of revolutionary conflict is a challenge to the sacred assumptions and reverential styles of old orders. Taboo or not taboo is the question. We have all seen able educational administrators turned into blithering idiots or faintly ridiculous footstampers over the past five years. I say this without rancor or criticism. There but for the grace of God ... There is an anguished terror that grabs the heart when normal expectations of deference are suddenly defied by spokesmen for the irreverant and the heretical. Some of us are old enough to remember when "bullshit" was two words. In any case, one word or two, it did not used to be a common response of students to a vice principal's kindly suggestion that they go

to study hall. (Some administrators today would settle if occasionally the students would add, "Sir...")

I have never been sure about how much of the revolution of the past five years has been intrinsically, as opposed to histrionically, serious. But no matter. It has been and is deadly serious for the administrators who have had to live through it. For the range of militancy that includes "Off the pigs!" and "Lock the dean in the john" at one extreme, and walk-outs and dirty expletives at the other, the benevolent rationality of Bethel-type approaches to conflict resolution may be naive and inutile. As we shall note later on, the very violence of the conflict may stem from previously unredressed grievances of a high level of intrinsic legitimacy. The point here is that once social anger has reached the point of challenging the fundamental structures and procedures of the system, administrators tend to wobble between dangerous belicosity on the one hand, and conciliatory panic on the other. I have even observed "flexible firmness" to end in disaster. Nobody seems to do crisis management very well. Mr. Hayakawa saved the body of San Francisco State at the cost of that institution's soul.

Mark Chesler at the University of Michigan's Center for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge has probably accumulated more operational wisdom in the general field of crisis management in schools than anyone else in the country.[13] But even Chesler would admit that his most insistent message is to manage crises by redressing the grievances that cause them. At the height of a battle over the legitimacy of the system, even sensitivity groups or face-to-face "problem-solving sessions" are unlikely to pacify militant Blacks, apoplectic Birchites, ferociously

liberated women, striking teachers, or draft-defying young men.

The sample sets of typologies listed above are only illustrative. Human conflict is so pervasive that fertile minds should be able to think up scores of ways of categorizing various conflict manifestations. And, of course, beyond the designation of types of conflict are questions relating to the dynamics of conflict. We know less than we should in this area. A generation ago Crane Brinton attempted in his classic work The Anatomy of Revolution[14] to line out recurring patterns of revolutionary developments. Surely all of us who have been involved in organizational conflict have seen stages of growing unrest leading to crisis and resolution. Techniques of prevention and resolution that are adequate for the incipient stages of conflict are unlikely to be useful during the crisis stage; and they tend to be irrelevant at the stage of relaxation (what Crane Brinton calls the stage of "Thermidor"). When conflict is incipient, or in early stages of virulence, a sensitive administrator may release dangerous tension with a special meeting or a joke. When the storm is raging at its height, certain types of meetings become impossible, and the very notion of jokes becomes obscene. When exhaustion is followed by a newly found harmony, the administrator's best therapy may be "natural healing", rather than any conscious strategy.

I do not mean to go on with this game of categories. Suffice it to say that any preparation of educational administrators for conflict resolution should involve making them sensitive to the varieties, permutations, combinations, and phases of conflict.

What then? Let us assume far more elaborate and sophisticated typo-

logical grids and flow-charts than are presently available; how far does cognition take us? Can educational administrators be prepared for conflict resolution by knowledge alone? Is the cognitive sufficient to the affective?

In the immortal words of Eliza Doolittle, "Not bloody likely!"

The key to successful conflict resolution is to be found in behavioral arts. Historically these arts have often been buttressed by widely accepted folkways and mores. For instance, if everyone accepts the legitimacy of Divine Right, the King needs a minimum of behavioral arts in order to resolve conflict. Patently, absolute control over the machinery of organized violence -- the police, the military, the secret services -- gives a leader substantial leeway in the tone of voice he uses in issuing an order.

In most educational organizations, operating within the federal structure and the democratic ethos of the United States in the early 1970's, the number of men who occupy universally accepted authoritative roles is limited. Some superintendents and principals in some backward areas may still operate like colonial district officers and get away with it. But I should guess for every one of these there are 10 educational administrators who are daily buffeted by contentions that place the very legitimacy of their role in jeopardy. They operate in what Saul Touster calls, from Physics, a "field of force". As I found out in a former incarnation as the Mayor of a small city, if one has ten portions of power, the use of more than one of these destroys the possibility of using the remaining portions. In a democracy, most power is latent and must remain so. Resolving conflicts under these circumstances becomes not a matter of

barking orders, but of personal leadership.

We come then to the heart of the matter. How can leaders be trained?

Here we are not without models -- from societies as removed in time and space as Platonic Greece and Mandarin China.[15] The most widely accepted series of contemporary models, I think, come from NTL and its various programmatic off-shoots up to and including Organizational Development. Some of these movements are more frequently parodied than paraphrased. My own belief is that they are far too easily dismissed by sophisticates whose exposure to sensitivity training has been limited to a rumor about a Thursday evening "feelies session" in the basement of a local Unitarian church. It has been my privilege, because of the geographic accident of my spending summers a few miles from Bethel, Maine, to have known many of the leaders of this applied branch of behavioral science. By and large they are able and insightful people. Surely, increased self-knowledge in group contexts is a useful ingredient in the preparation of leaders. Surely, communications arts that are based upon honesty, empathy, and generosity are vital elements in the tool-kit of skills of organizational leaders.

Some of my reservations about these being sufficient skills and attitudes have been hinted at earlier. I am sobered by the words of the British diplomat, Harold Nicholson, "It would be interesting," he wrote, "to analyze how many false decisions, how many fatal misunderstandings have arisen from such pleasant qualities as shyness, consideration, affability, or ordinary good manners ... The difficulties of precise negotiation arise with almost equal frequency from the more amiable qualities of the human heart."[16]

The wisest of the organizational-behavior and organizational-develop-

ment people know this and allow for it in their writings and in their practice. But the preponderance of NTL-type theory has been built around the notion that if openness, widespread participation, and respect for persons could only be substituted by "change agents" for executive sessions, authoritarianism, and impersonality, everything from morale to production would improve in any organization at any time. Taken in this neat form, and applied to the worlds of educational administration that I know from direct experience, these nostrums become dangerous oversimplifications. There are times in any organization when issuing an authoritarian edict is the only sensible thing to do. Colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates expect it. A fire emergency, for example, is no time to call together a faculty committee for the purpose of reaching consensus on which fire doors to close. On the other hand, a democratically arrived-at plan in advance for this emergency is both prudent and necessary.

Unfortunately so much of the literature of organizational leadership has built up an impossibly rigid series of alternative conflict-resolution models. We are told that some conflicts are resolved by authoritarian types; some by negotiating types; some by manipulative types; some by withdrawing types; some by oil-on-troubled-waters types; some (and may his Holy name be praised) by democratic, problem-solving types.

Alas, I must have no character, for I recognize myself in past conflict-resolution roles in each of these discrete categories. Furthermore, conscious style has been complicated by minor perversities. My particular rien in a particular conflict situation has often been influenced by factors as diverse as the time of the year, the time of the day, the number of

hours sleep I got the night before, the state of my digestion, the degree of threat to my status, the number of conflicting forces in contention, the tone of voice of petitioners, the perceived immediacy or postponability of the issue, the state of the budget, and finally my own sense of whom I was going to make mad and how mad, and whom I was going to make glad and how glad. Self-discipline stemming in part from a growing appreciation of behavioral consequences, in part from an over-riding commitment to exciting and insistent goals, have often served as correctives to perverse bodily chemistries or to cynically opportunistic calculations. But I know few successful administrators whose managerial style is so inflexible as to fit into one neat textbook categorization.

This caveat to the contrary notwithstanding, it is highly probable that in terms of the mix of attitudinal and behavioral styles, too many educational administrators at all levels over too long a period of time have adopted an overly authoritarian stance. If so, they have been getting some comeuppances in recent years and this is probably to the good. There is clearly now a general disposition towards more openness in communications and a broader participation in decision making. I am glad there is. Yet harried administrators must have the capacity and the right to vary their tactics with the nature of the terrain. And this involves the skill and the insight of art. Can the artistry of conflict management be taught?

I wish I knew. All of us are aware of attempts: T-groups; simulation, role-playing, in-basket, and gaming exercises; case studies; moot courts; mock legislatures. I am sure that some of these and related experiences are useful in sensitizing the uninitiated to the varied worlds of conflict

management. But, alas, most of it is like learning to swim on the sand. And many of the lessons learned in sociodramas are forgotten in the heat and confusion of reality.

If, in the eyes of a patient, a competent doctor is one who has "previously performed the operation successfully", may not the same be true of a competent conflict manager? My guess is that many of the great conflict resolvers among the educational administrators of tomorrow will come from those whom fortune has favored with rich and successful early experiences as precocious practitioners or at least as sorcerers's apprentices. Furthermore, I should guess that some of the most successful administrators of tomorrow will have come out of large Catholic and Black families where from infancy they have participated in bouncing ego brawls and have learned the hard way the value not of unanimity, but of what Crane Brinton once called, "multanimity" -- the philosophical acceptance of, and delight in, variety.

Does this say anything about preparing educational administrators for conflict resolution? I think perhaps it does. I think it says that case studies, sensitivity training, and simulation are better than formal theory; that novels and plays are better than textbooks; that apprenticeships and direct responsibility are better than anything else. In the field of conflict management, to coin a phrase, we "learn by doing".

Is this all that can be usefully said? Is there no proverbial wisdom to provide rough bench-marks to the harrassed educational administrator faced with unnerving conflict?

I think there is some wisdom, but its successful application still

involves artistic sensitivity and not a little luck.

First, a successful conflict manager in the field of education is aware of what is bugging the young, the oppressed, and the sensitive. When the Policy Institute conducted its national investigation of Disruption in Urban High Schools[17] last year, we found few surprises when we asked respondents about the causes of trouble. Racial injustice and new racial pride, in-school authoritarianism, archaic rules and procedures, stilted schedules, grinding boredom, poverty syndromes, depressing facilities, inadequate counselling, conflict models in colleges and in teacher strikes -- these were some of the repetitive themes. Recent studies of college unrest reflect similar provocations elaborated by such additional factors as the war, the draft, the nuclear threat, and the spiritual oppressiveness of modern technology.

Many of the larger societal issues are beyond the immediate control of educational administrators -- although their sensitivity about, and their attitude towards, these issues may be an important element in their capacity to relate effectively to troubled colleagues and charges. But surely, desirable changes in style, rules, and procedures inside an educational organization are within the competence of the educational administrator. His capacity to recognize legitimate grievances and patent injustices, and his willingness to respond to new hungers, new values, new norms by reasonableness and open-mindedness, are essential if conflicts are to be precluded and ultimately resolved in any basic sense. To repeat, this seems to me to be the basic wisdom of Mark Chesler's writings and workshops.

Second, an educational administrator can negotiate the troubled

waters of conflict only if he is harshly realistic about his own personal as well as role limitations. Virtuosity is not necessarily reflected in an administrator's willingness to rush to the bridge when the winds of conflict hit gale force. Virtuosity, instead, may mean delegation of authority; the involvement of third parties (especially when the administrator himself is adjudged by others to be a part of the problem); the studied use of tactical procrastination; or personal withdrawal from a particular scene.

Third, in attempting to resolve conflict, the successful educational administrator attempts wherever possible to substitute collective judgments for personal discretion. No man can last for more than a few weeks, physically or psychically, if he allows himself to take all of the heat of conflict, day after day after day. For one thing, before very long his judgment becomes impaired. The wise administrator knows how to create baffles and buffers to buy time, to absorb heat, to promote collective wisdom, to insure a maximum sense of legitimacy for decisions finally agreed upon.

Fourth, the wise administrator when confronted with crisis-type conflict that has gone beyond rational negotiation takes to heart the five-point strategy of Harry S. Truman: first, estimate your own resources; second, estimate your enemy's resources; third, form a judgment as to what is to be done; fourth, implement your judgment with a plan; fifth, persuade your leaders of the value of that plan and mass your forces for the attack. "Forces" may not mean National Guard or uniformed police. "Forces" may mean sensible students and faculty, a skillful downtown lawyer, cooperative media, a fast-talking chaplain, neighborhood parents or older siblings.

Many of the errors in attempts at conflict resolution have stemmed from administrators taking too narrow and too legalistic a view of their available resources.

Finally, the well-prepared administrator is one who knows that there are times in a year, in a career, in a life when cyclonic winds and waves will roll over everything in sight, and when the skill of the ablest mariner is probably less effective than his praying on his knees.-- if for no other reason than that he has thereby lowered the ship's center of gravity. In such circumstances, there is nothing to be ashamed of if a 50-year-old administrator finds himself crying himself to sleep in his wife's lap after ten 18-hour days of ineffectual coping. Few of us are supermen. But all of us can gain strength from a fearless reading of the signs of historic change. Hermann Hesse in Steppenwolf writes at one point, "Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap ... there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequences that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no single acquiescence."[18]

Who can doubt that some of the conflict of our times is a product of such epochal clashes and overlaps? If this is true, then what the educational administrators may need more than anything else is to keep the shield of his sense of history, his sense of humor, and even his sense of dispensability burnished bright.

Last summer, a good friend of mine who has rocketed from career-success to career-success found himself in a college presidency, where for a year he had been surrounded with turbulence that can only be called

wild. He confessed to me that he was not sure how much longer he could last. It was the first time that I had ever seen him really shaken. I tried to reassure him with a parable that I shall leave with you as my conclusion: A young and muscular cowboy joins a rodeo. The old-timers take the wildest untrained bull they have in stock. They drop the young cowboy on the bull's back and open the gate. In scarcely an augenblick the young cowboy is in the air and on the turf. He gets up lamely and ashamedly, shakes his head disconsolately and limps toward the paddock. As he enters, the old-timers break into a cheer. "Stop dumping on me," he cries.

"Dumping on you?" comes the answer. "My God, man, you stayed on for <u>seven whole seconds</u>!"

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FOOTNOTES

1. Conflict (New York: Free Press, 1955).
2. The Functions of Social Conflict (New York: Free Press, 1956).
3. "Conflict in Organization: A Re-examination," Academy of Management Journal, Vol. 9, No. 3, Sept. 1966.
4. The Managing of Organizations (Glencoe: Free Press, 1964). See esp. Ch. 11.
5. Ibid., p.273.
6. Managing Intergroup Conflict in Industry (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1964).
7. Warren Bennis, Organization Development: Its Nature, Origins, and Prospects (Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley, 1969).
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9. Op. Cit.
10. Douglas McGregor, The Human Side of Enterprise (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961).
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12. James March and Herbert Simon, Organizations (New York: Wiley, 1959).
13. See, for example, Carl Jorgensen and Mark A. Chesler, "Crisis Intervention in the Schools, II: A Report on a Conference of School Administrators," (mimeo.) Center for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Sept. 8-10, 1968; and Mark Chesler and Jan Franklin, "Interracial and Intergenerational Conflict in Secondary Schools," (mimeo. offset) Center for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge, University of Michigan. An expanded and edited version of a presentation made to the Meetings of the American Sociological Association, Boston, Mass. August 1968.

FOOTNOTES (continued)

14. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938).

15. For a short analysis of some classical attempts at leadership training, see Stephen K. Bailey, "Character Education for the Public Service," in Clarence H. Faust and Jessica Feingold (eds.), Approaches to Education for Character (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 137-151.

16. Quoted by James B. Reston, New York Times, April 11, 1967.

17. (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Secondary School Principals), Nov. 1970.

18. (New York: Bantam Books, 1970, 8th Printing), pp. 24-25.